

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and New Zealand

16 October 1999

PDAM workers in Jakarta victimised

The tap water firm PDAM Jaya in Jakarta sacked 12 workers this week for organising a series of protests over the last six months. During the last protest, angry workers occupied the company's logistics office in the centre of the Indonesian capital.

The workers were seeking to highlight the relationship between the city-owned company and its two foreign-owned partners, PT Pam Lyonnaise Jaya and Tames PDAM Jaya, which is affecting jobs and working conditions. The management warned 46 other employees that would keep their jobs only if they agreed not to participate in anti-company protests.

Jakarta's Governor Sutiyoso Muzahiem Mochtar sent a letter to the firm's management in early October urging "stern action" against the workers. The sacked workers have up to 24 years service but will receive the equivalent of only nine months salary in severance pay—between \$US223 and \$400.

A spokesman said that the 12 workers had been victimised because they were members of the PDAM Jaya Workers Union. They intend to file a lawsuit against the company for unfair dismissal demanding reinstatement.

South Korean union officials face heavy jail terms

State prosecutors in South Korea have ignored petitions demanding the release of six union leaders and have recommended that they receive a four-year jail sentence. The officials were detained for leading a 12-day strike earlier this year to demand the reform of the country's broadcasting system.

The strike followed years of campaigning for the reform of broadcasting rules that were rushed through parliament nine years ago by the then President Roh Tae Woo's ruling party. The union is demanding parliamentary supervision of top appointments, new rules guaranteeing editorial independence and laws to prevent excessive concentration of media ownership.

A coalition of media and broadcasting unions have threatened more strikes unless the union leaders are released and the government moves to bring in the long-awaited reforms.

Hyundai workers stage walkouts

Over 64,000 production line workers at Hyundai Motor staged a series of two-hour walkouts over a period of five days

this week to press the company for "meaningful wage negotiations". Company-union negotiations began on August 19. Workers walked out at the company's four Ulsan factories responsible for the production of passenger cars and industrial action followed at other work sites. The workers have also imposed bans on all overtime.

Filipino transport workers protest fuel prices

Transport drivers from Davao City, Davao del Norte and General Santos City in southern Mindanao in the Philippines staged a 24-hour strike last week to protest an increase in oil prices. The action was organised by the newly created Katawhan Kontra Kartel organisation over price increases by the three main oil companies—Petron, Caltex and Shell.

"These oil companies have been amassing enormous profits due to their monopoly of the oil industry. In the past five months alone, their additional earnings from price hikes have amounted to 80 million pesos daily. Their practices of manipulations and overpricing due to their monopoly of the industry must be stopped," a spokesman said. The organisation is demanding that Congress introduce legislation to nationalise the oil industry.

Indian power workers fight privatisation

Power workers in the city of Kanpur in northern India this week reaffirmed their threat to launch an all-out stoppage if the state government moves to privatise the industry to cut costs. The employees are concerned that the privatisation plans will be pushed through over the next two weeks, resulting in job losses and price rises for ordinary Indians. A union official said: "We have come to a consensus that if our demands are not met, then this time it will be a do-or-die strike".

Indian bank workers fight job losses

Thousands of bank workers in Calcutta staged a demonstration this week to protest the restructuring of three large banks that will lead to the destruction of jobs and conditions. A panel headed by former State Bank of India chief V S Verma has recommended a series of measures to slash costs at the Indian Bank, UCO Bank and the United Bank of India, by 55 billion rupees (\$US1.26 billion). The recommendations include a 25 percent cut in the workforce and an across-the-board pay freeze

All India Bank Employees Association Secretary Tarakeswar Charkaborti told the rally that the restructuring plans had to be

opposed at all costs. Another speaker said: “They are trying to blame the employees for the bank's problems when the real reason is the non-recovery of bad debts. The big ones get away.”

Sri Lankan estate workers framed up

A court case against six estate workers from the Stockholm Estate in Samimale (owned by Horana Plantation Ltd) was postponed to December 15 after the estate's manager failed to turn up in court. The workers, who are facing criminal charges arising from an alleged assault on the manager, claim that his failure to attend was a deliberate attempt to drag the case out.

The workers maintain they are being framed-up by the management and the police because they were active in a 13-day strike in February against the sacking of fellow worker Sinnaiah Devaraj. Over 250 other workers were also involved in the industrial action. The six were arrested during the strike and released on bail. They have to report to the local police station every week.

Devaraj was sacked when he demanded to know why his wife (another estate worker) was not allowed to work for one day after she reported in five minutes late. She had been delayed because she had been dropping off her one-year-old child at a day care centre.

One worker said: "This case has now been postponed five times. It has been put off because the manager doesn't turn up on the trial date. We can't work in some other area because we have to report to the police every Sunday. We are members of the National Union of Workers (NUW) but the union leaders have done nothing in regard to our court case. They do not care about the problems.”

Sri Lankan doctors union calls off strike threat

The executive committee meeting of the Government Medical Officers Association (GMOA) last week decided to drop threats of a national strike after reaching an agreement with the Sri Lankan government. The union agreed to allow two weeks for the government to offer a solution to its demand for the provision of adequate facilities for doctors serving in the war-torn areas in the country's north and east.

The GMOA has also criticised the government for granting a second extension of service to the present Director of Health Service at Kandy Hospital despite the fact that he had already passed the retiring age. The union said that the extension was granted for political reasons.

Bangladesh oil workers to strike

Workers at the Bangladesh Petroleum Cooperation (BPC) in Chittagong are threatening an indefinite strike from October 24 after the company reneged on an agreement to reinstate a sacked union leader and to withdraw its legal action against 16 other workers.

New Zealand health workers to strike

Health workers at four hospitals in Canterbury, New Zealand, voted this week to take strike action after negotiations for a new employment contract broke down. About 300 nurses and health

workers at Christchurch Women's, Lincoln, Lyndhurst and Rangiora hospitals will stage two-hour rolling strikes on October 27 and 28. Union spokesperson Chris Wilson said: “The current contract offer for women's and public health services staff is 4 percent less than that offered to other Canterbury Health workers.”

Nurses, midwives and health care assistants at the Tauranga Hospital in New Zealand voted this week to accept a 3 percent pay offer. Pacific Health increased its original 1.75 percent offer after the nurses stopped work for two days in September. The workers are also demanding increased staff numbers.

Rio Tinto slashes miners' wages

Miners at Rio Tinto's open-cut Howick coalmine in the New South Wales, Australia, began a three-day strike on Tuesday in opposition to the company's plans to cut wages by up to \$15,000 a year and destroy working conditions. Management formally terminated the work agreement covering the 178 Howick workers reducing their annual income to the bare legal minimum.

A spokesman for the Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU) said that the move was an attempt to pressure the miners to accept management proposals to cut working conditions. The Howick strike follows more than 12 months of unsuccessful negotiations for a new work contract at the mine. A similar situation is emerging at Rio Tinto's two other coal mines in the region—Hunter Valley No 1 and Mount Thorley.

Nurses cancel strike action

Nurses at Modbury Hospital in South Australia voted this week to call off strike action after the hospital's owner Healthscope agreed to suspend a plan to cut their annual leave. Healthscope had planned to introduce rostering changes next month, reducing nurses' annual holiday entitlements from six to four weeks and saving nearly \$200,000.

A union spokesman said that the nurses were determined not to let Healthscope erode their current wages and conditions. But the union has agreed to participate in a “consultative process” set up by Healthscope to find alternative ways to cut costs.



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